

NOTES ON THE INTRODUCTION OF THE FROG TO IRELAND

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The following are two articles discussing the introduction of frogs to Ireland. Comments in square brackets by myself.

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To Isaac Bickerstaff, Esquire,
at his house in Great Britain

Sir,

Finding by several passages in your Tatler that you are a person curious in natural knowledge, I thought it would not be unacceptable to you to give you the following history of the migration of frogs into this country. There is an ancient tradition among the wild philosophers of this kingdom, that the whole island was once as much infested by frogs, as that wherein Whittington made his fortune, was by mice. Insomuch that it is said, Macdonald the First, could no more sleep, by reason of those Dutch nightingales, as they are called at Paris, than Pharaoh could when they croaked in his bed chamber. It was in the reign of this great monarch, that St Patrick arrived

in Ireland, being as famous for destroying vermin as any rat catcher of our times. If we may believe the tradition, he killed more in one day than a flock of storks have done in a twelvemonth. From that time, for about five hundred years, [*this would take the date up to about 910 A.D.*] there was not a frog to be heard in Ireland, notwithstanding the bogs still remained, which in former ages had been so plentifully stocked with these inhabitants.

When the arts began to flourish in the reign of King Charles II, [*b. 1630 – d. 1685*] and that great monarch had placed himself at the head of the Royal Society, to lead them forward into the discoveries of nature, it is said, that several proposals were laid before his majesty, for the importing of frogs into Ireland. In order to (do) it, a virtuoso of known abilities was unanimously elected by the society, and instructed with the whole management of that affair. For this end he took along with him a sound able bodied frog, of a strong hale constitution, that had given proofs of his vigour by several leaps that he made before that learned body. They took ship, and sailed together until they came within sight of the hill of Howth [*now a suburb of Dublin*], before the frog discovered any symptoms of being indisposed by his voyage, but as the wind chopped about, and began to blow from the Irish coast, he grew sea sick, or rather land-sick; for his learned companion ascribed it to the particles of the soil with which the wind was impregnated. He was confirmed in his conjecture, when, upon the winds turning about, his fellow-traveller sensibly recovered, and continued in good health until his arrival upon the shore, where he suddenly relapsed, and expired upon a Ring's end car in his way to Dublin. The same experiment was repeated several times in that reign, but to no

purpose. A frog was never known to take three leaps upon Irish turf, before he stretched himself out, and dies.

Whether it were that the philosophers on this side of the water despaired of stocking the island with this useful animal, or whether, in the following reign, it was not thought proper to undo the miracle of a popish saint; I do not hear of any further progress made in the affair until about two years after the battle of the Boyne.

It was then that an ingenious physician, (for) the honour as well as improvement of his native country, performed what the English had been so long attempting in vain. This learned man, with the hazard of his life, made a voyage to Liverpool, where he filled several barrels with the choicest spawn of frogs that could be found in those parts. This cargo he brought over very carefully, and afterward disposed of it in several warm beds, that he thought most capable of bringing it to life. The doctor was a very ingenious physician and a very good protestant; for which reason to show his zeal against popery, he placed some of the most promising spawn in the very fountain that is dedicated to the saint, and known by the name of Saint Patrick's well, where these animals had the impudence to make their first appearance. They have, since that time, very much increased and multiplied in all the neighbourhood of this city. We have here some curious enquirers into natural history, who observe their motions with a design to compute in how many years they will be able to hop from Dublin to Wexford; though, as I am informed, not one of them has yet passed the mountains of Wicklow.

I am further informed that several graziers of the county of Cork have entered into a project of planting

a colony in those parts, at the instance of the French protestants; and I know not but the same design may be on foot in other parts of the kingdom, if the wisdom of the British nation do not think fit to prohibit the further importation of English frogs,

I am, Sir,

Your most humble servant

T. B.

The Dublin Journal of Medical and Chemical Science
1834, pages 480-81

Introduction of frogs into Ireland—It is not generally known that the introduction of frogs into Ireland is of comparatively recent date. In the seventeenth number of the Dublin University Magazine, there is a quotation from the writings of Donat, who was himself an Irishman, and the Bishop of Fesulæ, near Florence, and who, about the (year) 820, wrote a brief description of Ireland, in which the following passage occurs:

“Nulla venena nocent, nec serpens serpit in herba
Nec conquesta canit garrula rana luca.”

“At this very hour”, says our respected contemporary “we have neither snakes nor venomous reptiles in this island, and we know that for the first time *frog spawn* was brought to England, in 1696, by one of the Fellows of Trinity College, Dublin, and placed in a ditch in the University park or pleasure ground, from which these very prolific colonists sent out their croaking detachments through the adjacent country, whose progeny spread from field to field throughout the whole kingdom. No statue has yet

been erected to the memory of the natural philosopher who enriched our island with so very valuable an importation of so melodious and beautiful creatures.”

We may state however, that we have learned from good authority, that a recent importation of snakes has been made, and that they are at present multiplying rapidly within a few miles of the tomb of St Patrick.

Ireland’s National Biodiversity Data Centre has an online map showing distribution of the common frog (*Rana temporaria*) in Ireland as of January 2013 with records since 1845. http://records.biodiversityireland.ie/species_in_focus/index.php

REFERENCES

- Anonymous. 1710. Untitled article. *The Tatler and The Guardian*. (October 12)
- Anonymous. 1834. Introduction of frogs into Ireland. *The Dublin Journal of Medical and Chemical Science*. <http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=GfUEAAAAQAAJ&pg=PA480>